



STAYING ON TOP OF THE CURVE BALL: GRASS VALLEY EMERGENCY COMMAND CENTER DISPATCHES FOR DOZENS OF AGENCIES

By Liz Kellar, The Union Newspaper - Friday, April 19, 2013

The unassuming tan building tucked into the U.S. Forest Service compound next to the airport could arguably be the most important structure in Nevada County.

It's from here that a team of Cal Fire emergency medical dispatchers handle 911 calls for 31 separate agencies, including all of Nevada County's fire departments, as well as portions of Placer and Yuba counties.

The Grass Valley Emergency Command Center also dispatches for Sierra Nevada Ambulance.

"A lot of people don't know we're here, and they don't know what we do," said Fire Prevention Specialist Lynne Tolmachoff of the interagency center off Loma Rica Drive.

The Nevada-Yuba-Placer Unit's emergency command center is probably the most diverse in the state, she noted.

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"We dispatch all the Cal Fire resources in our unit," said veteran dispatcher Tony Peard, adding that those consist of 20 engines, three dozers, five hand crews from Washington Ridge Camp, one air attack plane and two air tankers from the Grass Valley Air Attack Base.

But the center's personnel wear a lot more hats than that, Peard said.

They are responsible for handling fire, medical and hazardous materials calls for the 31 fire departments, as well as Sierra Nevada Ambulance. The center is the air ambulance coordination center for the Sierra-Sacramento Valley EMS Agency that serves Nevada, Yuba, Placer, Sutter, Yolo, Colusa and Butte counties.

And it's the Region IV Coordination Center for California Emergency Management Agency's Fire and Rescue Branch, deploying mutual aid resources from 12 operational areas.

Last year, Peard said, the center mobilized 49 strike teams to large fires across the state.

Every day, the center's dispatchers answer dozens of calls for emergencies, such as vehicle accidents, structure fires, wildfires, gas leaks and medical aids, Tolmachoff said. In 2012, the center handled the calls for 28,666 incidents.

One of the ways in which the dispatchers triage, or tier, the response needed is with a software program they began using in 2009.

The emergency medical dispatch program helps the dispatcher ask a series of questions to determine the proper response.

"The more information we have, the better," Tolmachoff said. "The first thing we do is confirm addresses and phone numbers, then we'll ask what the initial problem is right at that moment ... and the age and the sex of the patient, are they conscious, are they breathing."

Then the dispatcher will go into a series of questions based on the medical issue.

That information is crucial to tier the response so that responders don't have to run lights and sirens unless necessary — a big safety issue, noted Battalion Chief Tom Webb.

The program also helps in providing pre-arrival instructions to a 911 caller for something as simple as helping control minor bleeding from a laceration, or to giving cardiopulmonary resuscitation to someone whose heart has stopped beating.

"One of the things we've done for years is give pre-arrival instruction, to help with medical emergencies," Tolmachoff said, adding that everyone has to be certified as an emergency medical dispatcher, and certified in CPR.

All new employees attend a four-week academy that covers a lot of ground, including learning about winds, fire weather, map-reading, radio theory and computer-aided dispatch, as well as how to use the resource ordering and status system that helps the dispatchers track and request resources such as equipment and support during major fire incidents.

"It's pretty intensive," said Peard, who teaches at the academy.

And then there's extensive on-the-job training.

The center's newest hire, Marc Zayas, began in December and is partnered with an experienced dispatcher who monitors the calls he answers.

"The hardest part is adapting to the new," Zayas said. "There is no routine. You're always trying to find the curveball and stay one step ahead of it."

And it can get busy, to the point where new recruits are advised to make sure they've had enough to eat or drink before the crush of calls starts, typically in the early afternoon.

The record for the center in a 24-hour period was 307 dispatches, not counting emergency or duplicate calls, Peard said.

"We can go 0 to 60 in one call — it's organized chaos," he said.

One common misconception is that callers think the person they're talking to is also the dispatcher.

Typically, there will always be two people on a call, Peard explained — one person taking the information and a dispatcher.

Having a primary call-taker allows them to stay on the phone with the caller and give instructions if needed — or helpful hints like turning on lights and putting pets away.

There are a minimum of four dispatchers on site during the winter, and five in the summer, Tolmachoff said.

Spring is probably the center's quietest time, she noted.

"In the winter, on the east side, we get all the medical calls from the ski resorts," she said.

"And in the summer, we get busy with fires, which last longer and generate a lot of radio traffic."

It's shaping up to be a busy fire season, she added.

With more complicated situations such as a vegetation fire, there will be a separate aircraft dispatcher.

A captain will oversee the operation and move resources around. The other dispatchers are kept busy answering the other calls.

As an example, Tolmachoff pointed to last year's Robbers Fire near Foresthill, where the center fielded 75 911 calls, not including cell phone calls.

And the second day of the fire, there were three other fires that posed a significant threat — one in Yuba County, one in Placer County, and one sparked by a head-on crash on Highway 20 in Nevada County.

"It was back to back to back," she said. "It draws you down so quickly."

(Pictures on next page)

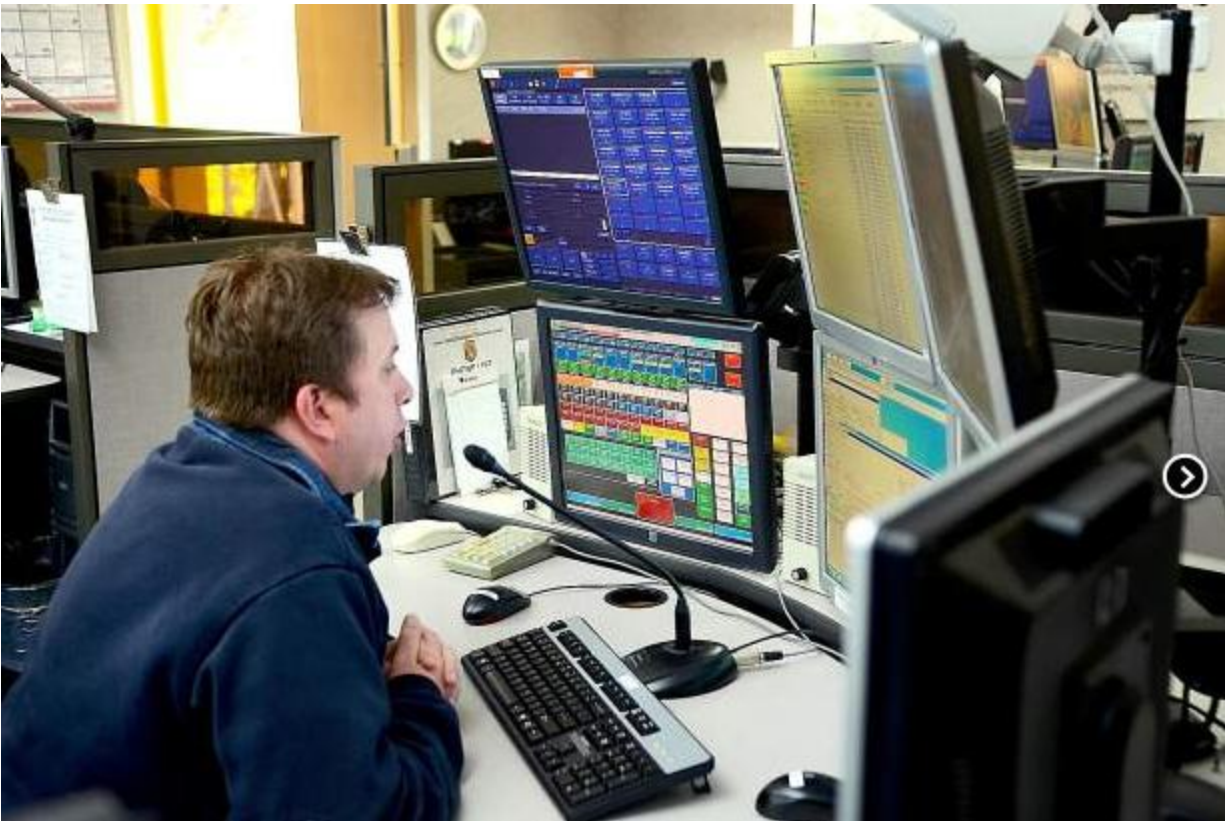


Photo for The Union by John Hart The Grass Valley Interagency Command Center on Loma Rica Drive near the Nevada County Airport that Calfire and Tahoe National Forest dispatch center. Steve Bradley dispatching Nevada County Fire Departments, Wednesday.



Photo for The Union by John Hart The Grass Valley Interagency Command Center on Loma Rica Drive near the Nevada County Airport that Calfire and Tahoe National Forest dispatch center. Vanessa Faulk Wednesday dispatching the eastern end of the local Nevada Yuba Placer Ranger Unit in the Truckee and Lake Tahoe area



Photo for The Union by John Hart The Grass Valley Interagency Command Center on Loma Rica Drive near the Nevada County Airport that Calfire and Tahoe National Forest dispatch center. Marc Zayas in training and taking 911 calls Wednesday that came into the center and veteran dispatcher Tony Peard on the right between dispatch calls.

